

Pride and Prejudice

Background Information

England during the Regency Period

Jane Austen's novels were published during England's Regency period, which lasted from 1810 until 1820. In 1810, when England's monarch King George III was deemed incompetent to rule the country because of an ongoing struggle with mental illness, his son, George Augustus Frederick, who later became George IV, was established by Parliament as Prince Regent and took over the leadership of the kingdom on behalf of his father. The Prince Regent reigned as a quasi-king until 1820, when George III died, and the Prince Regent was officially crowned King George IV.

During the Regency period, the English middle class gained considerable prestige and social status. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the English economy had expanded profitably since approximately 1750 due to an increase in manufacturing and commerce. Profits from an expanding colonial system likewise benefited middle-class businessmen and investors. Consequently, many middle-class merchants and professionals had experienced a sharp increase in wealth and, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, had established themselves as members of the upper class. Eager to improve not only their monetary standing but their social status and reputation within English society as well, these newly rich members of the upper class strived to align themselves with England's landed aristocracy. Many purchased estates and country homes that rivaled aristocratic mansions in splendor and luxury. Although these new-money upper class families, known as the **landed gentry**, did not hold hereditary titles, they commonly considered themselves to be on the same social level as the traditional landed aristocracy due to their wealth and possessions.

Austen's novels take place almost exclusively within the privileged circle of England's landed gentry and aristocracy. Historically, it is important to bear in mind that less than two percent of England's population enjoyed the social status and lifestyle of the upper classes. Most of England's population was composed of modest middle-class families, workers, housekeepers, servants, soldiers, etc. While the industrial revolution had enabled a small fraction of middle-class businessmen to become wealthy and move into the upper class, many Englishmen were suffering from the ramifications of the economic changes that were taking place. Technological advances led to increased mechanization in the workplace. Machines were replacing manual labor and laying off workers. Unemployment was rampant among England's working classes, leading to starvation and poverty for many families and causing workers' riots and social unrest. Politically, few citizens had the right to participate in government, and rich landowners dominated Parliamentary elections and political decisions.

Another political development that heavily influenced English society during the Regency period is only marginally referred to in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Following the French Revolution in 1789, the relationship between England and France quickly deteriorated. While many Englishmen had originally been sympathetic to the ideals of brotherhood, equality, and freedom championed during the early days of the French Revolution, France's deterioration into a state of chaos, known as the Reign of Terror, when rivalry between different factions in French society led to violence and mass executions, caused disapproval and fear among the English. In the late 1790s, Napoleon had established a totalitarian regime in France, and in 1804, he crowned himself "Emperor of France." One year earlier, in 1803, a war between England and France broke out that lasted until 1814 and put a severe strain on England's economy. Austen's references to the war and the military are vague: she allows the military to play a significant role in *Pride and Prejudice*, but she shies away from offering any political commentary related directly to the war.

The Industrial Revolution and Changes in England's Social Class Structure

Between approximately 1750 and 1830, the Industrial Revolution transformed England and Europe from an agricultural society to an industrial, capitalist economy. Increases in food production, accelerated by the practice of land enclosure, led to technological innovations in the workplace. Advancements in the mechanization of cotton and textile production and the development of the steam engine as well as the expansion of the railroad and canal system helped England become part of a global economy.

The Industrial Revolution had far-reaching effects on social class and family structures. England witnessed the rise of a **middle class** that could develop wealth and status independent of aristocratic origins. Many of these "new-money," middle-class families aspired to become members of the **upper class**. They purchased land, settled in elaborate and luxurious country mansions, and became known as the **landed gentry**.

The Industrial Revolution also brought about a sharp and steady increase in England's population. Factories developed around quickly growing urban centers, and workers moved from rural areas into the cities. Living space in the city quickly became scarce, and living conditions for the working classes were often deplorable. Child labor became a common practice in urban factories.

By the nineteenth century, a **social class system** consisting of three distinctive groups had established itself in England:

The **working class** consisted of agricultural workers, factory workers, mine workers, maids, servants, housekeepers, soldiers, etc.

The **middle class** consisted of merchants and professionals as well as business owners.

The **upper class** consisted of the old hereditary aristocracy and the new **landed gentry**, who had come into money through commercial enterprise and ascended from the middle class. Members of the upper class did not work and frequently employed farmers to work their land. During Austen's time, the upper class controlled England's politics.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy is a representative of the hereditary aristocracy. He is a wealthy landowner who does not have to work for a living. He employs workers to farm his land, and families living in the area surrounding his estate depend on his patronage. The Bingleys represent the new landed gentry. Mr. Bingley's father was able to acquire a considerable amount of wealth through trade. He gave up his business and moved his family into the country. Mr. Bingley and his sisters are now considered to be members of the upper class. The Bennets own land, but they are a middle-class family.

Women, Patriarchy, and Property Rights

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women in England had few legal rights. For most of their lives, they depended on the men in their lives—first their fathers and brothers, then their husbands—for protection and survival. Women could not own property. They were considered to be the property of men, hence depending on their fathers to “give them away” into a lucrative marriage union. After a father's death, his land and possessions often passed to a male heir (either a son or another male relative), leaving his wife and daughters entirely at the mercy of other male family members. Female preoccupation with marriage, such as Mrs. Bennet's obsession with finding husbands for all her daughters, was, therefore, not only a social preoccupation but a necessity for women who wanted to maintain a comfortable lifestyle for themselves and their daughters. In her descriptions of Mrs. Bennet, Jane Austen provides significant insights into the lives of women in her time:

She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (Vol. I, chapter 2)

Strict inheritance regulations, known as the “**entailment**” of an estate, determined how property would be passed through several generations within a family. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet's land and possessions are entailed to his closest male relative. A distant relative, Mr. Bennet's cousin, Mr. Collins, will inherit the family estate after the father's death. Once Mr. Collins inherits the house and land, Mrs. Bennet and her three daughters will be forced to find another home. Presumably, had Mr. Bennet had a son, that son would inherit the house and land. Austen explains that Mrs. Bennet “continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters, in favour of a man whom nobody cared anything about.” (Vol. I, chapter 13)

Not all estates, however, were entailed exclusively through the male line of inheritance. Very few exceptions determined that women could inherit the estate from their father or retain their husbands' possessions. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the rich and influential Lady Catherine De Bourgh, the patroness of Rosings Park, stands as a rare example of an independent woman in the early nineteenth century.

Aside from being barred from holding property, women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not allowed to enter into any kind of legal contract or initiate any legal actions. In the rare case that a marriage ended in divorce, a woman did not have the right to retain any money for herself, even if she initially brought money or possessions into the marriage in the form of a dowry.

The Theme of Social Class and the Lack of Class Mobility

Pride and Prejudice is a novel that describes the rigid class system present in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. Following the Industrial Revolution, select middle-class families had managed to acquire enough wealth in order to buy land and settle on sprawling estates in the country. These new members of the upper class, known as the landed gentry, were eager to align themselves with the traditional landowning aristocracy and, at the same time, distance themselves from those who remained in the middle class and below. Hence, once the landed gentry had been established as part of the upper class following the early days of the Industrial Revolution, class lines became virtually impermeable, and social mobility was rare.

Pride and Prejudice presents the conflict that arises when members of the middle class, such as the Bennets, mingle socially with members of the upper classes, represented by Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. The Bennets are a respectable middle-class family. They own a small amount of land, but they must work to cultivate it. They have few servants and limited financial resources. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, do not have to work for a living. Mr. Darcy's hesitation when it comes to admitting his admiration and affection for Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies his initial conviction that he could and should never marry a woman from a lower social class. The narrator tells us that "Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger." (Vol. I, chapter 10)

Mr. Bingley's sisters likewise demonstrate the upper-class desire to keep the lines between classes firmly in place. When Jane Bennet falls ill while visiting the home of Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth hurries to the Bingley estate to see her sister. The reaction and commentary offered by the Bingley sisters when Elizabeth arrives on foot and out of breath exemplifies their condescending upper-class attitude:

To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum. (Vol. I, chapter 8)

Clearly, Jane Austen was critical of the social barrier between the middle and upper classes (while, at the same time, remaining silent about members of the lower classes). In *Pride and Prejudice*, she ultimately allows her heroine Elizabeth Bennet to break through the class barrier and unite in marriage with Mr. Darcy. It is Elizabeth's superior strength of character, her independence, and her sense of dignity that qualify her to win Mr. Darcy's love and become his wife despite her low family connections.

The Theme of Marriage and Family

Pride and Prejudice begins with one of the most famous opening sentences in the history of the novel: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (Vol. I, chapter 1) These opening lines already introduce the novel's most central theme: marriage. In Austen's time, marriage was a topic of paramount importance to any middle-class family. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have five daughters, and—due to the system of entailment that determines that the Bennet estate will be passed on to the closest male heir after Mr. Bennet's death—their futures depend on their successful union with suitable husbands.

While firmly acknowledging the notion that marriage was a necessity for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Pride and Prejudice* likewise expresses Austen's disillusionment with the fact that women were, all too often, forced into marital unions purely out of financial necessity. Through her heroine Elizabeth Bennet, Austen advocates a new ideal of marriage and partnership based on mutual respect and love. In the context of the novel, Elizabeth's unconventional attitude toward love and marriage stands in contrast to a more traditional view on marriage, exemplified through the character of Elizabeth's best friend Charlotte Lucas. Like Elizabeth, Charlotte was born into a middle-class family. She understands that her financial and social future depends on her marrying a man who can provide for her. Charlotte reveals her conservative attitude toward marriage to Elizabeth:

Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other, or ever so similar before-hand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexations; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life. (Vol. I, chapter 6)

Charlotte ultimately agrees to marry Mr. Collins, although she knows that she has little in common with her future husband. Financial security is more important to Charlotte than romantic fulfillment.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, represents Austen's progressive attitude toward women and marriage. She refuses Mr. Collins' offer of marriage, even though this union would guarantee her financial stability. In a conversation with Charlotte, Elizabeth expresses her personal conviction that love and marriage must go hand in hand: "Your plan is a good one," replied Elizabeth, "where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it." (Vol. I, chapter 6)

When Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy finally admit their love for one another and agree to get married, their marriage promises to be built on mutual trust, respect, and love. The narrator explains:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both. (Vol. III, chapter 8)

The family, marriage, and inheritance concerns clearly take center stage in *Pride and Prejudice*. At the same time, all of the families Austen presents are deeply woven into the fabric of their social surroundings. In fact, Netherfield Park, Longbourn, and Meryton form a close-knit community in which individuals' problems and experiences become common social property. The world of *Pride and Prejudice* places the expectations of the social network clearly above an individual's desire for privacy. Families can rarely keep secrets, and one family member's shame quickly leads to the deterioration of the entire family's reputation. When Lydia Bennet and Mr. Wickham unexpectedly leave town together, the Bennet family fears the worst: unmarried and without the protection of her family, Lydia risks her virtue and reputation. As soon as the Bennets learn that Lydia and Wickham did, indeed, get married, the "good news" spreads like wildfire through the small community:

The good news quickly spread through the house; and with proportionate speed through the neighborhood. It was borne in the latter with decent philosophy. To be sure it would have been more for the advantage of the conversation, had Miss Lydia Bennet come upon the town; or, as the happiest alternative, been secluded from the world, in some distant house. But there was much to be talked of, in marrying her; and the good-natured wishes for her well-doing, which had proceeded before, from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such an husband, her misery was considered certain. (Vol. III, chapter 8)

With few social activities, the inhabitants of Meryton thrive on the transmission of family gossip. Individual privacy is hardly valued within the confines of this community so firmly set on propriety, social decorum, and reputation.

The Theme of Propriety, Social Decorum, and Reputation

Since the family's place within society was considered to be of critical importance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an adherence to the laws of propriety, social decorum, and reputation determined the ways in which human beings were judged by others. In *Pride and Prejudice*, individual accomplishments and an independent character are of little concern when it comes to evaluating a human being's value. Instead, the ways in which men and women are able to live according to the moral standards set forth by their community determines the extent to which their friends and neighbors will respect them.

When Lydia Bennet leaves home with Mr. Wickham without consulting her parents, her reputation is threatened. Any woman who engaged in any kind of inappropriate behavior with a man prior to marriage was considered morally corrupt. Once a woman had lost her virtue (virginity, good moral character) in the eyes of her community, she became a social outcast. It is only through the generous intervention of Mr. Darcy that Lydia's reputation can be rescued once she has officially married and settled down with Mr. Wickham.

But it is not only Lydia who jeopardizes her reputation. Even though she does not risk the loss of her virtue and, hence, moral reputation, Elizabeth Bennet is a character who transgresses social boundaries and violates social expectations. Elizabeth does not consider herself to be inferior to members of the upper class simply because she was born into a middle-class family. Indeed, Elizabeth is a character who, unlike her community, values personal worth and individual character over reputation and social status. Her straightforward nature gains the disapproval of the most influential woman of the upper class in the novel, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Lady Catherine is not shy to express her dislike of Elizabeth's character:

'Upon my word', said her Ladyship, 'you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person'...Lady Catherine seemed quite astonished at not receiving a direct answer; and Elizabeth suspected herself to be the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with so much dignified impertinence.' (Vol. II, chapter 6)

Elizabeth places her ability to think rationally and her desire to aspire to a marital union grounded in love, rather than financial security alone, above her eagerness to adhere to standards of proper social etiquette. When Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth, she immediately rejects his offer of marriage based on her progressive attitude toward marriage and personal happiness. Her rejection, however, comes as a shock to her mother, who believes that Elizabeth's disobedience will jeopardize her reputation. Despite her mother's objections, Elizabeth remains unshaken in her decision to reject Mr. Collins. She explains, "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart." (Vol. I, chapter 19)

Within the context of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet's character is most representative of the moral expectations that are at the center of the community of Longbourn, Netherfield Park, and Meryton. When Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins' proposal, her conservative mother desperately attempts to rescue her daughter's reputation. She addresses Mr. Collins with promises that she will demand obedience from a headstrong and independent daughter: "But depend upon it, Mr. Collins", she added, "that Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself directly. She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will *make* her know it." (Vol. I, chapter 20)

The Theme of Pride and Prejudice

When Jane Austen began drafting *Pride and Prejudice*, she originally planned to entitle her novel *First Impressions*. Indeed, first impressions and premature perceptions complicate the relationships between characters throughout Austen's novel. All too often, pride and prejudice influence characters' perceptions of one another. The romantic relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, for instance, can only be realized once both characters have set aside both pride and prejudice and, instead, formed an opinion of one another based on respect and cordial friendship rather than on superficial first impressions.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy both fall into the trap of pride and prejudice when they first meet. When Mr. Darcy first enters the Meryton neighborhood, "he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased." (Vol. I, chapter 3) Elizabeth commits an error in judgment when she trusts Mr. Wickham and relies on his judgment when it comes to forming an opinion of Mr. Darcy. Mr. Wickham falsely creates an unsympathetic image of Mr. Darcy, which makes it difficult for Elizabeth to admit that she feels attracted to him: "Almost all his actions may be traced to pride;—and pride has often been his best friend." (Vol. I, chapter 16) Because Elizabeth fails to see through Mr. Wickham's façade, she is willing to trust his judgment and forms a negative opinion of Mr. Darcy.

Once Elizabeth has realized that Darcy is, in fact, a man of honor and dignity, she admits having erred when in her judgment of his character. Elizabeth realizes that first impressions based on pride and prejudice rarely enable human beings to form a justified opinion of one another: "The more I see of the world, the more I am dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense." (Vol. II, chapter 1) According to Elizabeth, in order to get know another human being, we must look beneath the surface of a person's character.